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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the ambiguity which characterizes the role of the reading consultant in the public school. Instead of assuming the quasi-administrative role which is traditional, the consultant should be made a special administrator with power equal to that of the building prinicpal; he or she should fully understand the forces operating within the school environment. A broad knowledge of both reading methodology and theories of administration is recommended. In addition, the consultant should assume a helpful stance, to facilitate the clients' progress toward mutually established goals. (Author/KS)

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THE READING CONSULTANT AS CHANGE AGENT

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Clearly amidst the attempts to define the role and responsibility of the reading consultant is the notion that he should be agent of change. In spite of the range and amount of research in reading amassed during the preceding decade, little attention has been given to the role definition itself. A recent polling of state reading consultants by the JOURNAL OF READING showed a continued lack of clarity relative to the position throughout the United States and four Canadian provinces. (Ahern and White, 1974) Replies reflected a wide degree of poorly defined lines of personnel responsibility that ranged from consultants who served as remedial specialist to those who headed newly organized Right-To-Read projects. These findings, along with those of other researchers, would seem to indicate that there still remains a persistent ambiguity about the role which threatens the effectiveness of highly trained personnel in reading.

A salient notion about the decade of the 60's is that in response to the demands of administrators and the citizenry of the time many classroom teachers returned to university and college classrooms. The results leaves us with many highly trained individuals who possess the expertise of specialized staff members. Yet, a frightening truth may be that the position of reading consultant continues to waft inconsequentially amidst bureaucratic organizational arrangements. Therefore, it would seem encumberent upon those

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with available time and research to delineate that role in context of our present school organization.

The major purpose of this writing is to suggest a less ambiguous role for the consultant--one as agent of change and administrator of the school-wide reading and language arts program.

As early as 1967 the International Reading Association sought to explain away the ambiguity that plagued reading consultants by devoting an entire issue to a discussion of the role. (Stauffer, 1967) In the issue, Robinson cited four reasons for this renewed emphasis and interests: maturity in the reading field itself, an emphasis on research, the large number of inner-city reading cases, and the availability of new funds from the Federal government. (Robinson, 1967) He saw the major responsibility of the reading consultant of the future as that of assisting classroom reading teachers -a position supported by both Thomas (1967) and Miller (1967).

This helping notion as it is related to the role of consultant seems to remain with us in spite of the negative aspects that such a relationship can facilitate. (Cogen, 1973) While agreeing with certain aspects of the helping act, Lewis and Miel caution that greater emphasis should be placed upon helping teachers to isolate the professional components of their work and deal with them. (Lewis and Miel, 1972) The consultant as agent of change should, thus, be prepared to assume a role of helping which will permit the clients to learn the procedures and skills needed by the group as they move with efficiency and success toward mutually established goals.

Hall defines the reading consultant as, "a full-time employee who works directly with teachers and administrators within a school to develop and implement a total program of reading." (Hall 1972, p. 207) Implicit

in this definition is the ideas that the consultant should possess the necessary power base to substantiate his role among both subordinates and superordinates. The polling of state reading consultants mentioned earlier in this writing indicates a paucity of such established power bases among consultants who furnished replies.

In a recent case study of reading achievement in inner-city schools, Klepack reaffirmed the crucial role play by school administrators in affecting change in pupil achievement. (Klepack, 1974) The report suggests that the instructional leadership provided to classroom teachers accounted for the differences in pupil's reading achievement more so than did any of the other factors isolated--a finding consistent with the works of Lieberman (1973), Clark (1972), Weber (1971), and Levine (1967). The principal of the more successful school was observed as having recognized the nature and diversity of leadership through his identification of his assistant principals as appropriate instructional leaders. As such they became the agents of change and innovation and were empowered by the principal to carry out crucial instructional and leadership tack.

The point here is that while many elementary and secondary schools may lack such curricular expertise on the part of their usual administrators, or even possess an assistant principal for that matter, many such schools do have reading personnel who could serve in a similar capacity. Most ideally this should be the responsibility of the reading consultant, for in many cases he/she already possess the academic know-how that has established him/her to be competent in his speciality. Relieved of the traditional consultant-teacher role that Clegg and Trennepohl found to be an incongruent role expectation, he/she can begin to use his/her new influence in a manner that will give to others the premise for action, changes in attitudes and

habits, which will lead to mutually desired organizational goals. (Clegg and Trennepohl, 1971)

Although there is no consensus regarding their relative significance, a number of specific characteristics of social organizational systems have been observed and may contribute to clarification of the reading consultant's role of intervention in bureaucratic organizations. Chief among these are the conceptual elements of George Homans--activity, sentiment, interaction, and norms. (Homans, 1950) These elements refer respectively to things people do, the feelings they have, the communications they carry on, and the standards they uphold. The important point here is that one must seek to understand explicitly the degree to which one's theory of change and innovation takes into account the important social and psychological dimensions that characterize a school's clients--its staff, its students, and its community members. People need time to unlearn, and different ways to interact with each other. They need time to re-examine, to explore, and to see the need for a proposed change. Thus the consultant who would be an agent of change must begin with an understanding of the environment of the school. A failure to adequately examine the environment could result in no change or a hardened resistance on the part of the targets.

The process of influencing begins with the failure to obtain certain social reinforcements. It ends with the reinforcement or confirmation of new attitudes and behaviors. Knowledge of the social setting can assist the consultant in his attempts to recognize and deal with probably sources of opposition so as to either ameliorate them, circumvent them, or use them directly as change levers. In brief, this means making less operational all sources of resistence to a proposed, and mutually agreed upon change.

Building upon the earlier work of Lewin, Edgar H. Schein describes the mechanisms of change through the use of three stages--unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. (Schein, 1969) In the first stage, unfreezing, the agent creates a motive to change. He may do this through the utility of three suggested methods of creating disequalibrium within a target group.

a) lack of confirmation or disconfirmation
b) induction of guilt-anxiety
c) creation of psychological safety by reduction of threat or removal of barriers.

Most schools annually publish reading scores, the quality of which, more often than not causes disequalibrium among its clients. Rather than spend time shifting blame and seeking relief from cirticism, the consultant might use this as an opportunity to change the habitual ways of operation, which brings us to Lewin's second stage of the change process--that of changing.

Here the agent of change is required to respond to the situation ripened for change and based on the information he has gathered in the stage of unfreezing. The time is ripe for change when teachers, students, or parents become dissatisifed. The consultant should be prepared to recognize this ripe moment and begin to initiate the process of innovation that will restore equilibrium. It may well be that the initial job of the consultant as change agent is that of helping to identify "images of potentiality rather than that of focusing on ways of alleviating present pain." (Lippitt 1961, p. 159) Getting the staff and the community to see the relative advantage of moving toward a desired change might result in winning half the battle incurred whenever a new idea is presented. In this respect, Zander writes:

> "Resistance will be prevented to the degree that the changer helps the changee to develop their own understanding of need for the change, and an explicit awareness of how they feel about it, and wha can be done about those feelings." (Zander 1961, p. 546)

Failing in this effort the consultant may do well to reconsider his proposal or wait for the situation to ripen.

In her study design to define the extent to which principals organized activities and resources to promote ideas and to stimulate teachers to think about changing, Lieberman again found the principal to the be the most effective agent of change within a given school. (Lieberman, 1973) This was due in part to the close proximity that he held in regards to the teachers and the remainder of the administrative hierarchy. The implication of this study is important to the thoughts that help to formulate the role of the reading consultant who would be an effective innovator. Few principals will admit to having the time needed to devote to full time management of a school's reading program. It would therefore seem to be a welcomed new strategy of overall management procedure to place certain necessary and specialized decision-making powers and responsibility in the hands of staff members who work directly with clients. This we do in spite of those who would argue that the principal is the rightful and overall instructional leader. A further truth may be that few principals possess the range and specialized knowledge to qualify them to be both administrator and reading specialist--a dysfunctional concept from its genesis.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to evoke concern for the persistent ambiguity that continues to characterize and threaten the role of reading consultant. While failing to delineate the desired role specifically, the writer has suggested that:

1) the consultant should be made a special administrator with power parallel to that of the building principal.

2) the consultant should understand fully the forces operating within the school environment.

3) the consultant should possess a broad-based knowledge of both reading methodology and theories of administration, change, and diffusion in order to take advantage of opportunities to change unhealthy and dyfunctional aspects of the total reading program.

4) the consultant should assume a helping stance that will permit the clients to learn the procedures and skills needed by the groups as it moves with efficiency and success towards mutually established goals.

Seeking solutions to complicated problems of reading instruction through the traditional "bag of tricks" role played by consultants of the past never helped anybody--at best it passed reading instruction off as something akin to magic, rather than as the scientific process of developing a learned, human behavior in our nation's youth. It doesn't seem economically, or educationally sound practice to continue giving support to the quasi-administrative role that many consultants currently occupy. They rarely are able to bring about meaningful and lasting change among the teachers they assist, with the distressing results that the children who should ultimately benefit from their specialized talents continue to show deficits in reading development at all levels and among all groups.

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